

Today we celebrate women around the globe for their extraordinary contributions in all areas of society – as professionals, as bread-winners, as caregivers and caretakers.



But today we must also focus on the stark reality that women suffer disproportionately from inadequate health services, including maternal health and family planning services, discrimination, the effects of war, and, at times, victimization by harmful traditions.

The statistics are staggering:

- Several hundreds of thousands of girls and women are trafficked every year as illegal workers and/or forced into prostitution.
- An estimated 100 million to 140 million women and girls undergo female genital mutilation/cutting, the act of cutting, removing, or otherwise harming the female genital area, a major threat to their health and well being.
- More than 530,000 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every year. The vast majority of these deaths are avoidable with known, simple, and cost-effective health interventions.
- More than 200 million women in the developing world would prefer to postpone their next pregnancy or not have more children, but are not allowed access to modern methods of contraception, leading to 52 million unintended pregnancies and 22 million abortions.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by hunger, disease, and death. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 58 percent of all people living with HIV are female. In some countries, girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have three to six times higher HIV prevalence than boys their age.
- Inaccessible medical care, poverty, and malnutrition cause at least 80,000 women to suffer complications during pregnancy that include obstetric fistula. The consequences of this condition, when untreated, are life shattering. Many times the child dies, and the mother has lifelong reproductive and urinary complications.
- Every year, 51 million girls are married before their 18th birthday.

Girls who marry as children are often more susceptible to the health risks associated with early sexual debut and childbearing, including HIV and obstetric fistula. Lacking status and power, these girls are often subjected to domestic violence, sexual abuse and social isolation. And early marriage almost always deprives girls of their education or meaningful work, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty as well as gender inequality and sickness.

Despite these startling statistics we know that women around the world have an undying spirit, are surmounting obstacles, and are committed to making their lives, their families' lives, and their communities better. As President Obama said: "...we must also recommit ourselves more broadly to ensuring that our daughters have the same rights and opportunities as our sons: the chance to attain a world-class education; to have fulfilling careers in any industry; to be treated fairly and paid equally for their work; and to have no limits on their dreams. That is what I want for women everywhere."

On May 5th, President Obama announced that his Administration was committed to spending \$63 billion over six years to bring better health to people around the globe. The President's 2010 Budget focuses attention on broader global health challenges, including child and maternal health, family planning, and neglected tropical diseases, with cost effective interventions. It also provides robust funding for HIV/AIDS and adopts an integrated approach to fighting diseases, improving health, and strengthening health systems.

On behalf of the American people, I am proud to celebrate this year's International Day of Action for Women's Health. In partnership with the people of Nepal, the U.S. not only supports education for all girls and critical health and family planning services, including HIV/AIDS and reproductive health programs, but also opposes violence and discrimination against women. We will continue to draw inspiration and strength from our partners around the world - to work together to protect and improve the lives of every woman and child on this globe. In doing so, we will fulfill the great promise of prosperity and progress for all people, and for all nations.

Through a strong and collaborative partnership with the Government of Nepal, U.S. government-supported activities reach more than 14 million men and women of reproductive age and 3.6 million children under the age of five. In spite of over ten years of conflict, Nepal has made great strides in key maternal and child health areas. Nepal has achieved more than a 45% reduction in child mortality since 1996 and is among only 16 countries in the world (and one of six in Asia) that are on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds. Maternal mortality has also declined significantly in Nepal in the past 10 years.

However, women's health status in Nepal is still poor and we must continue to work toward improving their situation. Discrepancy in access to health care between urban and rural populations is evidenced by the fact that rural women, on average, give birth to four children while urban women now average only two children. Unmet need for family planning among rural women is almost a third greater than among urban women. Throughout Nepal, more than 80% of women give birth at home, and less than 20% of all deliveries are attended by a health worker trained in emergency obstetric care. Even more significant is the fact that less than half of all currently married women in Nepal between the ages of 15 to 49 make decisions about their own health care either independently or with their husbands. On this Day of Action for Women's Health, let us recommit and strengthen our efforts to improve the health and well being of all Nepali women, and that of their daughters and granddaughters.

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